The Washington Post ST

Poster

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Caveat Cavett

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Monday night Dick Cavett lost his benign diffidence; his engaging coolth had been replaced with a smiling, incompletely repressed testiness. Just underneath his small amiable, throw-away jokes was anger.

He had reason. Sitting across from him in the chief interviewee's seat was a short-haired engineer named Magruder. This Magruder, a technocrat sprung from the recesses of the Department of Transportation, was appearing on the show by White House order. That was why Cavett was unhappy. He had lost control of his show. His booking agent was no longer John Gilroy, the show's executive producer, but one Alvin Snyder, an assistant to Herb Klein, the aptly titled White House director of communications.

Magruder had been ordered on to the show to praise the SST before it goes to a vote in the Senate today. This, according to Gilroy, Cavett was quite willing to do, but with the proviso that someone like Sen. William Proxmire also appear to take the other side. It was so agreed upon, but then, "Friday night I got another call from Snyder," Gilroy says, "he told me, 'We don't like the way you've handled this. We want Magruder to go on alone.' "

The producer refused to buy that and he relates that he thought the issue was finished until Monday, when he got two calls, one from the American Broadcasting Company's program department and another from the legal department "saying we must have a pro-SST spokesman."

Snyder's version is different. He says Magruder was merely a suggestion, one prompted by the White House's opinion that the Cavett Show had not handled the issue fairly. In the past, Cavett has had Frank Borman and Rep. Clarence Brown to speak in favor of the great supersonic turkey and Proxmire and Sen. Birch Bayh to speak against. In addition, Arthur Godfrey said unkind things about the SST in the course of doing a guest stint. Gilroy concedes that the billion dollar buzzard may not have gotten quite equal treatment, but that it was very close to even-steven.

That's not the point. The Federal Communications Commission has procedures for enforcing the equal-time/fairness doctrine. If there was a beef, it should have been taken there and not handled through White House media musclemen.

Getting the full story out of anybody in this administration requires an F. Lee Baily cross-examination, but close questioning of Snyder got him to say no, there isn't anyone up at the White House who spends his time clocking TV programs to see who gets how many minutes, not at all, it was just that he happened to be watching the Cavett show, why, yes, we do supply

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speakers for other shows and yes, sometimes we do call them up, but they often call us up.

You can take that for whatever you think it's worth, but what's clear is that it's very easy to bully any federally-licensed broadcast operation even without the call coming from the White House. Electronic journalism is bashful about defending its First Amendment rights; its news operations frequently lack the long, nasty tradition of healthy independence of the print media. This is especially so of entertainers who float into the news side of broadcasting from time to time.

In this case, however, it looks like it was the network that folded. The ABC officials are denying that they ordered Gilroy and Cavett to put Magruder on the air. Well they should. For what they've done is the same as if we here at The Washington Post had allowed Snyder and Klein to call up and dictate what we print on our front page.

More and more, as their inadequacies, failures and disasters, seeps through the wall they've built up like water through plaster, administration people are yelling about the news. The President complains no one takes pictures of his Laotian victories, presuming you can find one. But they're entitled to their whimpers. They're even entitled to manage the news. Failing that, they even have a right to lie, which they also don't do very well.

But none of that, as they're finding out, can hide the truth for long. So now we have Agnew demanding to play film editor and Snyder playing booking agent. They wish to edit the papers and produce the TV shows.

Let's hope they're better at running the media than running the government. They're off to a bad start, however. In addition to all their sins, Magruder was terrible TV, a howling bore, grinding a lot of numbers out of his mouth and yucking about productivity. He probably cost Cavett five points in the ratings.